

φαινομενον

現象学年報

Jahrbuch der japanischen Gesellschaft für Phänomenologie
Annual Review of the Phenomenological Association of Japan
Annuaire de l'association japonaise des phénoménologues

KOJ

29

日本現象学会編
2013

λογος

Phenomenology and the Visibility of the Mental

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Introduction

According to a widely-held view, mental states are composed of intracranial phenomena. As such, they are perceptually inaccessible to everyone but their owner. Call this the “unobservability principle” (UP). According to UP, we never actually see another’s mental states. What we see is brute behavior: smiling, laughing, frowning, squinting, scowling, flailing arms, trembling brows, and the like. Since the mental states “behind” behavior are realized within the head of their owner, they are, in principle, closed off from others.

As Fred Dretske notes, accepting UP introduces “a special difficulty about other minds because, to put it roughly, we can’t see other minds. They are unobservable. You can see the smile (at least the upturned mouth), but not the thought “behind” it” (Dretske 1973, p.36). This is epistemologically significant since it raises the question of how I can secure knowledge of, or at least justified belief in, the existence of other minds. UP also has empirical consequences for thinking about our social nature. Since we cannot see another’s mental states directly and perceptually verify their existence, we are forced to fall back upon alternative methods of securing knowledge of other minds. For example, we might use analogical inference (Melnyk 1994), imaginative simulations (Goldman 2006), or employ quasi-scientific theories (Gopnik and Wellman 1992). All of these methods involve inference from what we can see (scowling, laughter, crying) to what we cannot see (the experience of anger, happiness, or sadness) and are therefore hypothetico-deductions. In other words, they are united by the shared conclusion that since mental states cannot, in principle, be *seen*, they must, in principle, be *inferred*.

Generally accepted without argument, UP informs the bulk of ongoing discussions of social cognition in philosophy and cognitive science.¹ But is it true? This paper challenges UP. I defend the view that we do, at least sometimes, see aspects of others’ mental states. Focusing on emotional experience, I challenge UP by rejecting the existence of a necessary ontological distinction between “inner” mental states and their “outer” behavioral expression. Instead, I argue for a “hybrid” view of mentality according to which external features of our expressive behavior—along with, of course, internal states and processes—constitute proper parts of the emotion they express. First, I identify some individuals who’ve held this view—particularly several thinkers within the phenomenological tradition—and specify what a rejection of UP amounts to. Next, I

marshal different sources of empirical evidence that seem to support this hybrid view of mentality. I conclude by defending the view against several objections.

Seeing other minds

The view here defended is not new. However, it's not always made as explicit as it could be by those who seem to accept it. For example, consider several phenomenological thinkers, all of whom appear to challenge UP. Max Scheler provides the canonical statement of the view that we do sometimes see others' mental states, particularly their emotional expressions. He writes:

For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, within his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection, with his rage in his gnashing of his teeth, with his threats in the clenching of his fist, and with the tenor of this thoughts in the sound of his words. If anyone tells me that this is not 'perception' [of the emotion itself], for it cannot be so, in view of the fact that a perception is simply a 'complex of physical sensations', and that there is certainly on sensation of another person's mind nor any stimulus from such a source, I would be him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts (Scheler 1954, p.260).

Another phenomenologist who endorses this view is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The following is a representative quote:

I perceive the grief or anger of the other in his conduct, in the face or his hands, without recourse to any 'inner' experience of suffering or anger, and because grief and anger are variations of belonging to the world, undivided between the body and consciousness, and equally applicable to the other's conduct, visible in his phenomenal body, as in my own conduct as it is presented to me (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.415).

One can find intimations of this view in other phenomenologically oriented philosophers as well, such as Levinas, Sartre, and the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (cf. Krueger 2013). Wittgenstein arguably held this view (cf. Overgaard 2007), as did Dewey. But what does it amount to, exactly?

Put simply, the claim appears to involve rejecting the idea of an ontological distinction between mind and behavior. Stated positively, the idea is that "mind can be equally and unambiguously instantiated in experience and behavior" (Pickard 2003: 89).² To see behavior, or at least some patterns of behavior, is to literally see mind in action. Accordingly, there is no great philosophical mystery as to how we can have knowledge

of, or justified belief in, other minds: we simply see them. Though I come to know my own mental states via introspection or by feeling them, that is, via an immediate phenomenal acquaintance that individuates them as my own—and though, on the other hand, I instead see the mental states of others embodied in their expressive behavior, rather than introspecting or feeling them—in both cases the status of my access is the same: in both cases are the mental states given to me *directly*. I observe my own mental states; likewise, I observe others. And thus (the argument goes) the epistemological problem of other minds is dissipated. The problem dissolves because the crucial obstacle blocking the possibility of direct knowledge of, or justified belief in, other's mental states—their fundamental hiddenness or unobservability—is denied (cf. Cassam 2007; Overgaard 2013).

Put this straightforwardly, the view perhaps seems implausible—and probably rather philosophically unsophisticated. In addition to the possibility of pretense (e.g., I can exhibit behavior indicating I'm experiencing one emotion while internally feeling something else), there seems to be another good reason for rejecting this view: there is very little, if anything, in common between mind and behavior. So it's implausible that seeing the latter is to see the former. However, such an assessment is too hasty. First, there are several empirical streams of research that appear to support this view or something very close to it. Second, it appears capable of withstanding a number of objections. The view thus warrants a more charitable consideration.

For the sake of simplicity—and in line with the strongest supporting empirical evidence—I focus in the following on the idea that we can sometimes directly see emotions. I suggest that demanding similarity between mental states (emotions) and their behavioral expression (Pickard 2003, p. 93) is the wrong way to think about this issue. Rather, what is at stake is the complementarity of mental states (including emotions) and behavior.

Empirical support and the complementarity of experience and expression

First, some empirical evidence. Consider Moebius Syndrome, a congenital form of bilateral facial paralysis. People with Moebius Syndrome cannot facially express emotion (Briegel 2006; Cole & Spalding 2009; Bogart & Matsumoto 2010). As a result, many report a diminishment of their emotional lives. One person with Moebius reports that, because of his lack of facial mobility, he is forced to intellectualize his emotions—"I sort of think happy or think sad, not really saying or recognizing actually feeling happy or feeling sad"—and that the phenomenal qualities of his emotions "are there but they are probably reduced" (quoted in Cole 1999, p. 308). Another person with Moebius claims not to have had emotions as a child. Rather, she says she only learned to express, and thus feel, her emotions after starting to mimic physical expressions observed while on holiday in Spain, which enabled her to become adept at "using the whole body to express [her]

feelings” (Cole & Spalding 2009, p.154). The narratives of others with Moebius are similarly characterized by their adopting alternative strategies of bodily expression. Prosody, gestures, vocalizations, painting, dancing, playing a musical instrument, etc., seem to allow them to express, recalibrate, and share the phenomenal character of their emotional experience (Bogart & Matsumoto 2010). Without the ability to spontaneously express their emotions via the face, part of the emotional experience appears to be missing.

Not all facial paralysis is congenital. For example, patients who've voluntarily received Botox injections, which inhibits facial expressions, report a decrease in the felt intensity of their emotional experience (Davis et al 2010), along with increased difficulty in processing emotional language that refers to facial expressions requiring the paralyzed muscle (Havas et al 2010). An individual with Bell's Palsy, a progressive (and potentially reversible) form of facial paralysis, reports a similar experience (Cole 1998). He says he inhabited an “emotional limbo” while the paralysis was at its strongest; however, as he gradually regained facial animation over several months, the phenomenology of his emotions was accordingly recalibrated. Individuals who've suffered severe spinal cord injuries and thus lack the ability to bodily express emotions likewise report less intense feelings of high-arousal emotions like fear, anger, or sexual arousal (Chwalisz et al 1988; Hohmann 1966; cf. Laird 2007, pp.74-76; Mack et al 2005). Other studies suggest that manipulating facial expressions generates emotion-specific autonomic activity and produces a corresponding change in emotional phenomenology (Davis et al 2009; Laird 2007; Niedenthal 2007). A recent study even found that involuntary sun-induced frowning, which involves the same facial expression as anger, led individuals to report heightened feelings of anger and aggression than those wearing sunglasses or walking with the sun behind them (Marzoli et al forthcoming).

These studies appear to support the idea that some emotions can be instantiated in some patterns of behavior. The bodily or facial expression of some emotions enables us to experience those emotions; the physical expression is part of the vehicle instantiating it.⁴ Removing an aspect of this vehicle (Moebius Syndrome, Botox injections) thus removes part of the emotion itself—and the experience is altered accordingly. But, to be clear, this evidence does not suggest that emotions are *identical* with their behavioral expression. There are still private phenomenological, physiological, and neural aspects of emotional experience not exhausted by their behavioral manifestation (more on this later). When I am genuinely happy and smile broadly, for example, my happiness is not simply in the physical features of my publically-observable smile, or *in* the complex neural and physiological processes that enable me to perform such a smile. Nor does this evidence suggest that there are or must be similarities between the phenomenology of my emotion and its behavioral expression. The phenomenal character of emotion is clearly different in kind than its expressive behavior. Thankfully for my purpose here, however, I don't require similarity. Rather, I need *complementarity*. This is the key point

for understanding how it is we sometimes see emotional experiences instantiated in expressive behavior.

By "complementarity" in this context, I am referring to the property of a state, process, or system (hereafter, "system") by which different components of that system come together to coordinate their respective functions and thus form an integrated or harmonious whole. This coordination enables the system to do things it could not otherwise do. For example, different physical components of an automobile's engine (cylinders, valves, pistons, crankshaft, etc.) coordinate their respective functions and, in so doing, enable the engine to instantiate a specific property (locomotion). This property is independent of their individual functions; but it is, nevertheless, dependent upon their harmonious integration. These components possess certain properties that make them functionally poised to, when integrated with certain other components of the system, become enablers for the locomotive process. This integration therefore allows the individual components of the engine to collectively do something they could not otherwise do. Yet the locomotion is not, strictly speaking, in any of the individual components any more than happiness is in an upturned mouth or particular bit of neuroanatomy. Rather, the process of locomotion spans across them, as it were, enabled by the integration of the relevant components (cylinders and valves but not ashtrays and seat belts). In this sense, then, are the individual components of a system proper parts of an instantiated process without thereby being wholly assimilated to this process or any of its other constituent parts. Yet it is nevertheless sensible to speak of them as constituents of the process of locomotion.

Similarly, in the case of emotions, neural, physiological, and expressive-behavioral processes coordinate their respective functions to allow the subject to do something she could not otherwise do—experience emotion—without the coordination of these difference processes. To remove one part of this coordinated system—the expressive component, say, in the case of Moebius Syndrome or Botox injections—is to compromise the subject's ability to instantiate emotional experience. In this way is the behavioral expression part of the vehicle for some emotional experiences, similar to the way that a piston is part of the vehicle of locomotion.

To press this point a bit further: the relation between the individual components of this vehicle is not one of strict identity. Even when the automobile is moving, the various parts which enable it to do so remain distinct before, during, and after its movement. But they are nevertheless part of the ontology of locomotive process. Likewise, in emotional experience, the behavioral component remains physically distinct from, say, the phenomenology of the emotional experience. But in terms of their complementary function, to perceive expressive behavior is at least at times to perceive (part of) the emotion, part of its ontology. In this sense, then, are some emotions hybrid. They are composed of parts both inside and outside the head of the subject. UP therefore rests on a false conception of mentality as an exclusively intracranial phenomenon. And if this is

so, we no longer have to fall back upon hypothetico-deductive inference to secure indirect knowledge of, or justified belief in, other minds. Instead, we can see them directly, the same way we see tables, rocks, and trees. To see certain patterns of expressive behavior is simply to see part of the hybrid mind in action.

Something like this hybrid view of mentality, I suggest, motivates the view defended by phenomenologists and others when they say that we can see other minds. If this view is sustainable, it seems to put pressure on ways of thinking about other minds that presuppose UP.

Objections

I now consider three objections. I refer to the view discussed above as the “direct perception” (DP) approach to other minds: that is, the view that we can sometimes directly perceive aspects of another’s mental life within their expressive behavior. In responding to these objections I attempt to flesh out this proposal even further.

The behaviorism objection

Perhaps the most obvious objection to DP is that it entails a kind of crude behaviorism (Jacob 2011). Since I have discussed this objection in more detail elsewhere (Krueger and Overgaard 2012), I will only briefly consider it here. According to Jacob, DP faces the following dilemma: another’s bodily expressions either constitute their emotional states or they do not. If they do not, then we do not really perceive another’s mental states, only their behavior—and we have made no advance beyond inferential models that presuppose UP. However, if they do—if an emotion, for example, is identified with patterns of observable behavior—then DP is a kind of reductive behaviorism. This, in turn, invites a host of well-known philosophical difficulties. Additionally, by reducing experience to behavior, it also seems to reject the very experiential data that phenomenology claims to be interested in.

However, it’s not clear this objection works. Much depends on how one interprets Jacob’s statement that bodily expressions either do or do not “constitute” emotions. This can be understood in either a strong or a weak sense. Taken in the strong sense, “constitutes” here means “amounts to” or “equals”; and on this interpretation, DP would seem to lead to reductive behaviorism. The view that the expression equals or amounts to the emotion in the sense that there is nothing more to the latter than the bodily expression is surely a crude version of behaviorism.

On the weak interpretation, however, “constitutes” means “is a part of”. It is much less obvious that this interpretation entails behaviorism. For, although certain expressive behavior constitutes an external part of some emotional processes, the view doesn’t imply that we perceive all of the emotion. Mentality generally, and emotions more specifically, are hybrid; they are composed of both in-the-head and outside-the-head parts and processes.

Thus, saying that we perceive parts of some emotions directly is consistent with there being other parts (e.g., inner psychological parts, neural substrate, phenomenological profile, etc.) that are not directly perceived. We clearly don't have perceptual access to the totality of another's mental life; you are capable of thinking, intending, and feeling things that I have no experiential access to. But at times, at least, we can see proper parts of others' emotional experiences within their expressive behavior.

Additionally, DP certainly doesn't entail a rejection of phenomenology. Even if the phenomenology of certain emotional states is dependent upon their behavioral expression, it doesn't follow that their phenomenology is wholly *reducible* to their behavioral expression. On the contrary, my suggestion once again is that some states are hybrid: they are composed of both internal and external parts and processes that come together in a complimentary way to instantiate certain emotions. Acknowledging behavior's role in driving some emotional processes by no means entails rejecting or disregarding the phenomenological component. Jacob's objection therefore rests on a false dilemma: the insistence that mental processes are either wholly inside or wholly outside. According to the hybrid view of emotions defended here, rather, some emotional processes are both.

The amodal objection

Joel Smith has recently put forth an interesting view that can be used to criticize DP (Smith 2010). We might term this the amodal objection. According to this objection, when we perceive another's expressive behavior, associated mental phenomena are not directly given (as I have argued) but rather amodally *co-present*.

Smith's claim is motivated by the phenomenological observation that what we *experience* often outstrips what we *perceive*. For example, consider visually perceiving a tomato. When I have a visual experience of the tomato, I seem to experience the whole tomato: I see it as a solid three-dimensional object with a front and back, an object with density that extends in space. Strictly speaking, however, the tomato is perceived *aspectually*, as presenting only part of itself (i.e., an aspect or profile) relative to my own spatial position as an embodied perceiver. When I stand in front of the tomato, I see one part of it but not others; when I move, another part becomes visible while others are hidden. Nevertheless, it still seems that I experience the tomato in its totality; I experience parts (e.g., the back) that I do not actually perceive. This is, Smith suggests, a fact about the phenomenology of perceptual consciousness. When I visually perceive the tomato, the hidden parts are thus *amodally co-present*.⁵ Again, they are *experienced* but not, strictly speaking, *perceived*.

Analogously, although we only ever perceive another's behavior (a frown or smile), we nevertheless experience associated mental phenomena (their misery or happiness) as amodally co-present within this behavior. For Smith, this means that other minds are,

in a sense, experientially accessible. His view thus appears to be consistent with DP's insistence that we have experiential access to another's mentality. But it also preserves UP. This is because, for Smith, mental phenomena remain intracranial phenomena and thus are, strictly speaking, unobservable—even if they can be (amodally) experienced.

The problem with this view from the perspective of DP is that perceiving another's mental life is not analogous to perceiving the backside of three-dimensional opaque objects like tomatoes. With this latter experience, I can move my head, body, or change my entire position by walking around the object until the occluded side is experienced directly. Experiences "of this sort involves the possibility of verification by a corresponding fulfilling presentation (the back becomes front)" (Husserl 1960, p. 109). But clearly this is not the case with another's mentality. Peering more closely, moving around, or even manipulating another's head will never bring their mentality into direct view—at least in a way analogous to solid opaque objects. This sort of perceptual "verification must be excluded a priori" (Husserl 1960, p. 109). So the mentality of another can never be anything more than amodally co-present within expressive behavior. Given this conclusion, it's not clear that DP advocates want to endorse this view. It seems to contradict the directness and immediacy of our perceptual access to another's mentality. Put another way, our (amodal) experience of their mentality is phenomenally degraded with respect to our direct perception of their behavior.

Joel Smith might respond that, much like perceiving the occluded backside of opaque objects, my perception of another's mentality can be fulfilled by "the co-presented and presented taking part in a harmonious experience" (Smith 2010, p.741). In other words, I can vividly experience another's anger, say, within my ongoing perception of their patterns of behavior that continually confirm this anger: their scowling, shaking their fists, and speaking loudly. However, this response remains problematic from the perspective of DP. It only further affirms that what I perceive in others are *bodily features*, and not features of their *mentality*, which continue to be unobservable no matter how "harmoniously" they integrate with behavior. Accordingly, Smith's view doesn't appear to have made a significant advance over more traditional approaches to other minds that, like Smith's view, rest on a tacit acceptance of UP.⁶

The coarse-grained objection

The third objection I want to consider is that gestures and facial expressions are far too coarse-grained a vehicle to adequately supply much in the way of social information. In other words, they are not the right sort of thing to adequately convey fine-grained information about something as complex as an internal mental state, such as an emotion. At best, they can only offer very rough approximations of what another is thinking and feeling. Indeed, it certainly seems initially nonsensical to say that in perceiving gestures or facial expressions we perceive the *content* of another's thought or emotion.

So it's implausible to suggest that we *literally* perceive mentality instantiated in bodily expressions.

There is some truth to this objection. But while looks can be deceiving, they can also be highly illuminating. Consider the central role that bodily expressions play in our perceptual detection of others' emotions. Nonverbal behavior expresses emotion, articulates interpersonal attitudes, presents one's personality, and plays a crucial role in negotiating dynamical aspects of social interactions such as turn-taking, feedback, and attention (Argyle 1975). Congruent gestures and postures convey mutuality of topic and interest, and build rapport between partners (Goodwin 1981).

However, there are many everyday cases where a facial expression, gesture, or whole body expression can articulate information at odds with an individual's verbal report. For example, head and bodily cues (facial expressions versus gestures or posture) often carry different affective information (Ekman 1965). The former carries information about the specific emotion being experienced but little about the intensity or level of arousal; the latter, on the other hand, carries information about the intensity or level of arousal but little about the specific emotion. So, when interacting with a colleague or loved one, I might perceive a mismatch between head and bodily cues—perhaps my wife insists that nothing is wrong, convincingly feigns a smile, and yet I perceive a certain heaviness to her posture suggesting that something is bothering her—and I can utilize this information to discern her authentic emotional state. Taken together, the entire profile of another's bodily expressiveness can reveal salient, and often unexpectedly *specific*, information about their cognitive and affective status.

Although I've mainly discussed emotions, consider also how another person's intentions are often embodied in their expressive actions, making them available for direct perception. For example, kinematics can specify intentions in a very fine-grained way (Runeson 1985). Rune and Frykholm (1983) found that viewers of patch-light displays could accurately judge the relative weight of a box lifted by an actor simply by observing the actor's kinematics. Moreover, viewers could accurately judge the weight actors *expected* to lift based upon their kinematics, but prior to their actual lifting. And they could even tell when actors were pretending to lift a heavy box, discerning both the actual weight of the box lifted as well as the weight the actors intended to convey to the viewer. Similarly, Good (1985) found that viewers could, when watching point-light displays of staged social actions (asking for a light, chance meeting of old friends, etc.), discern whether the activity was intended and not simply a chance encounter.

Developmentally, it seems that our perceptual sensitivity to intentions—along with a host of other social contingencies, like the timing and quality of expressive behavior and emotional attentiveness (Reddy and Morris 2004)—is present early on, developmentally speaking. 7-9 month-old infants perceive certain actions as playful intentions (ambiguous acts like offering and withdrawing objects) with different goals and outcomes than when the same intentions are interpreted literally (Legerstee 2005, p.124; Reddy 1991, 2008).

5.5 month-old infants distinguish between caregiver's mischievous versus neutral-faced expressions when a ball is offered than taken away, spending more time inspecting the first kind of look than the second and producing more person-specific than object-specific looks (Legerstee 2005). Three month-olds can perceptually discriminate biological motion from non-biological movements in point light displays (Johansson 1977). Like emotions, intentions, too, are thus often perceptually available via bodily kinematics and the subtle qualities of attention and interaction (Atkinson et al 2007). From a very young age, perception offers sufficient evidence "for judging—without inference—not only what an agent does but what she is up to" (Proust 2003, p.203). The coarse-grained objection thus doesn't adequately concede the skillful way that we perceive the range of different social information—much of it very fine-grained—directly available in bodily expression.

To conclude, I have drawn up both phenomenology and different sources of empirical evidence to argue for the plausibility of the idea that we do, at least at times, have direct perceptual access to features of others' mentality. This doesn't mean that we see everything another person thinks and feels, of course. But we do see a lot. Our mental lives are often discernible parts of a common world of experience.

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¹ Consider the following quote from a recent handbook of social psychology. Nicholas Epley and Waytz write that “[p]eople do not have direct information about others’ mental states and must therefore base their inferences on whatever information about others’ mental states they do have access to. This requires a leap from observable behavior to unobservable mental states that is so common and routine that people often seem unaware that they are making a leap” (Epley and Waytz 2009, p.499).

² Hanna Pickard terms this the “observational model” of mind, according to which mind is observable.

³ For a consideration of some of the ways that we can see mental states other than emotions, see Krueger (2012).

⁴ Contra Pickard (2003, p.89), however, there's no reason this experience-behavior instantiation has to be “equal” and “unambiguous”. It doesn't matter if an emotion is unequally instantiated, say, weighted more heavily toward the experience side of the experience-behavior vehicle. So long as *part* of the emotion is instantiated in a given piece of behavior, to see that piece of

behavior is to see a piece of experience (mind). Similarly, this instantiation can be ambiguous—but again, as long as this instantiation is realized, that is sufficient to secure direct access to another’s mental properties whether or not the perceiver recognizes it as such. I can be wrong about my seeing—say I see a cat crossing the road a ways in front of me but mistakenly believe it to be a large rat—but making a mistaken perceptual judgment doesn’t detract from the fact that I do in fact see a cat (even if I see it as a large rat).

⁵ Husserl puts the point this way when he writes that, “there belongs to every external perception its reference from the “genuinely perceived” sides of the object of perception to the sides “also meant”—not yet perceived, but only anticipated and, at first, with a non-intuitional emptiness (as the sides that are “coming” now perceptually)··Furthermore, the perception has horizons made up of other possibilities of perception, as perceptions that we could have··if, for example, we turned our eyes that way instead of this, or if we were to step forward or to one side, and so forth” (Husserl 1960, p.44). A similar idea motivates Noë’s (2004) sensorimotor account of perceptual consciousness.

⁶ See Krueger (2012) for a longer consideration of Smith’s view, as well as a discussion of other objections to DP. See also Overgaard (2013).

